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Ambiguous Heritage and the Search for Identity in Native American Fiction

Identity has been a hotly debated issue in American cultural history as well as in literature, it "has become one of those words full of sound and fury" (Pinsker 2001: 51). As Daniel Boorstin states, "Americans are the people in quest of [them]selves" (1963: 5) and thus the relationship between one's inherited and received culture or between various inherited cultures is very frequently depicted in American literature. In the notoriously known passage from *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, the question of what constitutes American identity is answered by means of comparison with Europe, but already de Crèvecoeur mentions cultural plurality and mixed heritage as important aspects of American identity. Of course, he does not use these terms but talks about "that strange mixture of blood" and gives an example of a family "whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have four wives of different nations" ([1782] 1990: 897).

While it was still possible in de Crèvecoeur's times to define American national identity in the Anglo-Saxon context, as European-Americans formed an "unquestionable" majority and thus could perceive themselves as "unhyphenated Americans," as "the incarnation of America as such" (Barša 1999: 185) with the shifting demographics they, too, need to become aware of themselves as European-Americans, that means in a way ethnic Americans. As in the post-WW II years the idea of a nation state gave way to the concept of identity, the interest in defining American national character has been replaced by the interest in ethnicity.

An interesting part of this complex issue is the relationship between various ethnic heritages and personal identity. The issue can be even more complicated when cultural heritages are connected with ethnic / racial heritages and thus when one's body becomes an ethnic or "racial signifier" (Lin 2003: 53) and a person then has to define his/her identity not only by inner means of who the person feels to be but also against external judgments and stereotypes of what others assume about the person's identity based on the person's body.

As suggested above, the discussion on identity is quite a contentious and complex one and this paper offers only one perspective, one possible approach by focusing on how the issue of mixed cultural heritages, racially signifying bodies and personal identity has been dealt with in selected works of Native American literature, namely those texts that consciously address these issues on the example of people of mixed Native American and Euro-American (or African-American) origin, the so-called "mixedbloods." The first work that fictionalized the uneasy situation of mixedbloods is Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* and the way the novel approached the topic is contrasted with several contemporary works by Louise Erdrich and her husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris, which also make the quest for identity and the complex situation of the people of multifaceted heritage one of their central concerns.

The difficulties involved in biculturalism or mixed heritage are well understood by a majority of Native American writers because they themselves are mostly experiencing similar dilemmas – they write about the Native American world yet they live on its margins if not out of it, in the intellectual part of the white world, on university campuses. They often have mixed origins and might not necessarily know native languages, and thus their Native American identity is rather pan-Indian than tribal. Yet, in the mainstream world where these authors have usually received their education and which, for the most part, forms their readership, they are typically recognized as minorities, or marginal voices, and are judged against prevailing stereotypical images of what constitutes an Indian. Furthermore, Native American novelists express themselves through a typically Euro-American medium – the novel, which is very different from the Native American oral tradition. Louis Owens aptly concludes:

> For the contemporary Indian novelist – in every case a mixedblood who must come to terms in one form or another with peripherality as well as both European and Indian ethnicity – identity is the central issue and theme, and, as [James] Clifford has suggested, ethnic identity is always mixed, relational, and inventive. (1994: 5)

Most of the mixed-blood characters engage in complicated identity quests which usually have the form of a dilemma, of a choice between one of the inherited traditions. Thus when Mourning Dove in 1927 published *Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Description of the Great Montana Cattle Range*, it was not only a first novel by a Native American woman, but also a work that clearly named "what was to become the dominant theme in novels by Indian authors: the dilemma of the mixedblood, the liminal 'breed' seemingly trapped between Indian and white worlds" (Owens 1994: 40).

The book's protagonist Cogewea is the daughter of an Okanogan mother and a white father but after the father deserts the family and the mother dies, Cogewea and her sisters are brought up by their maternal grandmother Stemteema, who represents the traditional elder. The dilemma for Cogewea is presented in the form of a choice between a white and a mixed-blood suitor. While the novel is "recognizable as a typical romantic story of betrayed love, stoic loyalty, and sentiment," at the same time it attempts to "define the complex dilemma of the mixedblood" (Owens 1994: 45).

Cogewea says about herself: "I am not a full-blood – only a breed – a *sitkum* Injun" (Mourning Dove 1981: 26) and laments: "Regarded with suspicion by the Indian, shunned by the Caucasian, where was there any place for the despised breed!" The book's villain Densmore confirms this opinion when, on seeing a ranch full of people of unrecognizable origins, he wonders: "Where were these picturesque Indians ...? Instead, he had been lured into a nest of halfblood, whom he had always understood to be the inferior degenerates of two races" (Mourning Dove 1981: 48).

When Cogewea is about to marry a white easterner, her sister Julia agrees "not because she was ashamed of the Red race, but since civilization was the only hope for the Indian" (Mourning Dove 1981: 274). However, the traditional grandmother Stemteema warns Cogewea about the dangers awaiting her as a wife of a white man. Explaining her decision, Cogewea says: "My white blood calls to see the world – to do – to live" even if her Indian part (Spirit, as she says) "tells me that I am stepping wrong" (Mourning Dove 1981: 253). While at first Cogewea tries to embrace the white part of her heritage by marrying a white suitor, she later sees through his wickedness and marries a mixedblood.

According to Louis Owens, in having Cogewea marry a "breed" like herself and allowing them to accidentally come into fortune, Mourning Dove fails to produce a satisfactory ending of the tale. Not only does it remind him of a pulp fiction plot, but it postpones the issue till the next generation:

> With the conclusion, the dilemma of the mixedblood poised between red and white worlds remains unsolved. Very literally allowed a place in neither the Indian nor white races, Cogewea will [...] produce children who will, like the parents, be halfbloods. The novel ends on a note of stasis, with nothing resolved, none of the many questions answered (Owens 1994: 48).

On the contrary, Arnold Krupat considers the choice of a happy ending as already a positive sign of the possibility of future for the people of mixed descent. His criticism of *Cogewea* tries to see the novel in its historical context: "In this

regard, it may fairly be said that *Cogewea*'s irresolution provides an extraordinarily accurate account of the betwixt-and-betweenness of mixedbloods of different blood types and quanta in the period" (Krupat 2002: 95). Contrary to Owens, Krupat appreciates the fact that Mourning Dove refused to fictionalize the idea of the mixedblood as a vanishing race. In "holding firm against the advice of her collaborator/mentor, L. V. McWhorter, who recommended a tragic ending" we may see "Mourning Dove's belief in Indian survivance" (Krupat 2002: 88).

Moving more than half a century forward, we find a very interesting writer of mixed descent – Native American and German-American – Louise Erdrich. In her critically highly acclaimed novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), one of the mixed-blood characters is Albertine, the daughter of a Native American mother and a white father. In Albertine's case, it is again the body that reveals her to the outer world as a mixed-blood. She says about herself: "I was light, clearly a breed" (Erdrich 1984: 22). She feels different from the rest of the family because of her looks and seems uncertain of how she should relate to the fact. On the contrary, her mother Zelda has no doubts as to where her daughter belongs. She says about Albertine: "My girl's an Indian. [. . .] I raised her an Indian, and that's what she is" (Erdrich 1984: 23).

In proclaiming her daughter Indian, Albertine's mother not only expresses her disregard for the whites but also affirms Albertine's membership in the community. Erdrich plays out the two possible approaches to defining an Indian – the "blood quantum" and the "culture" and shows the evasive, if not completely mistaken, nature of racial identification. Zelda insists that her daughter is only Indian because of the way she was brought up yet even in that comment she forgets to acknowledge the impact of the off-reservation schooling that Albertine has received. Regardless this omission, Zelda identifies Albertine in a manner that is very typical for Native Americans – the self-identification combined with the community's acceptance. As Gerald Vizenor says:

> The application of mixedblood geometric scores was not a form of tribal cultural validation. Skin color and blood quantums were not the means the tribe used to determine identities. The Anishinaabeg [Chippewa] classified a person Indian if he lived with them and adopted their habits and mode of life.
>
> (qtd. in Rayson 1991: 31)

While Albertine can be seen as the most hopeful character in *Love Medicine*, the one who eventually learns how to live effectively in both worlds and how to see her dual heritage as two parts of her identity complementing one

another, Pauline Puyat (introduced in Erdrich's 1988 novel *Tracks*) is, according to Annette Van Dyke, "the character most troubled by being a mixedblood" (1992: 21). Pauline is a métis, a person of mixed Indian and French-Canadian ancestry, a descendant of hunters in the clan no longer known by its name.

Pauline engages in a complicated spiritual quest and her main dilemma is of spiritual matter: she is attracted both to the traditional Chippewa beliefs and to Christianity. The Chippewa people, although now living in reservations in North Dakota, came originally from the Great Lakes area and their mythology is connected with water. For Pauline, the tribal tradition is represented mainly by the power of the water monster Misshepeshu, which is usually considered evil, although in some stories he has a dubious character because good spirits, such as Thunderbird, an opponent of Misshepeshu, are associated with the sky. As Ruth Landes claims, we can, to a degree, draw a parallel between Misshepeshu's and Thunderbird's fight and the eternal conflict of the Christian God and Satan (1968: 31).

Finally Pauline decides that the Chippewa world is vanishing, not worthy of preserving because the people "receded and coughed to death and drank" (Erdrich 1988: 139) while the white world is spreading and becoming more and more powerful. Pauline concludes: "It was clear that Indians were not protected by the thing in the lake or by the other Manitous" (Erdrich 1988: 139). Thus she turns away from her Native American heritage and embraces Christianity in the hope of saving the Chippewa people by bringing them to Christ. She decides to enter a convent but in order to become a nun, and particularly a saint, which is her greatest ambition, Pauline has to lie about her Indian ancestry to be accepted. Nevertheless, the dilemma remains. In fact, most of Pauline's "behavior shows her conflict between her Chippewa and her Euro-American heritage she attempts to claim" (Dyke 1992: 21).

While in the convent, Pauline still believes in the power of the water monster. She hopes to gain a victory over him with the help of Christ, whom she sees in her visions, ironically, as seated on the convent's stove. When her visions disappear, she believes that Christ, a newcomer in the area, no longer appears to her because the water spirit man has chased him away. "Christ was weak, I saw now, a tame newcomer in this country" (Erdrich 1988: 192). Pauline hopes to become the Christ's "savior" (Erdrich 1988: 195), which for her means to save Christ from the water monster by killing the monster. Thus she sets out in a boat on the Matchimanito Lake, Misshepeshu's home, armed with a spear in a scene reminiscent of a flirt, an initiation ritual, a hunt, and parodying St. George's fight with the dragon. At the same time, Pauline is,

symbolically, trying to do away with her Native American heritage, to kill this part of her identity and her past.

Thus "Pauline plays out her bizarre amalgamation of Chippewa belief and Catholicism" (Dyke 1992: 22) in a way conflating, as Dyke suggests, Christ with the Chippewa sky spirit and the Chippewa water monster with Satan (1992: 21) yet herself using the power of the water monster to become a sorceress. While seemingly trying to help, Pauline becomes dangerous to the Chippewa community. When she appears in *Love Medicine* as Sister Leopolda, she is already in the state of gradual personal disintegration as if the two spiritual traditions (or at least the ways in which Pauline interprets them) cannot hold together, cannot be made into a meaningful and life-sustaining whole. It is thus Pauline's spiritual life that becomes a battlefield for the two traditions she inherited. She claims the Euro-American part of her heritage by passing as white and converting to Catholicism and she turns away from the Native American part of her self.

The most difficult position among the mixed-bloods seems to be that of a person of Native American and African-American origin as the person is often subject to racial discrimination and ostracizing for *both* parts of his/ her heritage. This is the case of Rayona, one of the protagonists of Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987). Rayona is trying to comprehend her life and to come to terms with her identity. Her mother is Native American and her father black yet in her identity quest Rayona is not helped much by either of them – her father is mostly absent and her mother, with whom Rayona has a very tense relationship – is fatally ill. Rayona's parents are no longer together and Rayona remembers what her mother used to say to her father: "We're the wrong color for each other" (Dorris 1987: 9). Aware of the skin color issue, Rayona comments: "Once, in a hardware store, I found each of our exact shades on a paint mix-tone chart. Mom was Almond Joy, Dad was Burnt Clay, and I was Maple Walnut" (Dorris 1987: 9).

Rayona is brought back from the city of Seattle to a Montana reservation to live with her grandmother. Although her grandmother, Ida still speaks the tribal language and knows traditional dancing, she is not really the traditional elder like Cogewea's grandmother, because she lives her life by TV shows. Instead of providing Rayona with a community of accepting relatives, she can only offer television characters. As Owens says: "Ida will seldom be far from a television set [. . .] living in virtual isolation from the rest of her family and tribe" (Owens 1994: 220).

When a priest introduces Rayona to a local youth group, she is painfully reminded of what her body signifies: "The two [Indian teenagers] look me up and down. I know what they see. Wrong color, outsider, skinny, friend of the priest" (Dorris 1987: 40). Instead of receiving support from her extended family, Rayona is, in fact, abused by a relative, a full-blood cousin Foxy: "You're the one whose father is a nigger" (Dorris 1987: 41). Unlike Albertine, whose community accepts her and claims her despite her dual heritage, Rayona's community rejects her as an outsider, as different, a lesser member of the community, even an enemy:

> Foxy calls me "Buffalo Soldier" after the black men who were cavalry scouts and fought Indians a long time ago. He leaves a note stuck in the Africa section of my geography book. "When are you going home?" [...] "You sure you ain't looking for the *Blackfeet* reservation?" (Dorris 1987: 44)

The priest tries to be helpful by acknowledging Rayona's situation:

> "It's not easy being a young person alone at your age," Father Tom says, "when you're different."
> "I'm not different."
> "I mean, your dual heritage," he says. "Not that you shouldn't be proud of it." This is the first time he's admitted to my skin color, to the shape of my nose, to the stiff fullness of my hair. (Dorris 1987: 51)

However, Father Tom is not making the situation any easier because he finds himself physically attracted to Rayona. Finally, he tries to persuade her to go back to the city (so that she could not report his sexual advances). To help her solve her identity problem, he offers a cheap would-be Native American piece of jewelry: "Wear this. Then people will know you're an Indian," (Dorris 1987: 58). As Owens comments on the scene, "identity is all surface" (Owens 1994: 221) almost a mask to be put on or taken off. "With the medallion, Rayona may become Native American rather than African-American" (Owens 1994: 221). But in this way, through misunderstanding and trivialization of the identity issue, Rayona becomes one of the loneliest characters, deprived of support from family, tribal community as well as the institution of the church. Running away into a neutral territory, Rayona is trying to find out who she actually is or could be.

Despite Rayona's claim that: "It's as though I'm dreaming a lot of lives and I can mix and match the parts into something new each time," (Dorris

1987: 80) she is not really mixing but trying on different identities in order to fit in. For example, she assumes an identity of a white middle-class, spoiled daughter. Finally though, she realizes that in order to come to terms with herself and the things that happened to her, she must return. Paradoxically, she achieves a position within the reservation when she, dressed up as Foxy, her main abuser, triumphs at a rodeo. Masking her gender and ethnicity and thus, for the sake of the rodeo ride, passing as her full blood male cousin, Rayona challenges the community's assumptions and their stereotypes about racial identity. By becoming a "rodeo queen," actually receiving a prize "for the roughest, toughest, clumsiest cowboy" (Dorris 1987: 112), Rayona wins her position in the reservation community.

Still, Rayona seems to be connecting with only one part of her identity, the Indian part, and not with her African-American heritage and thus rather than mixing different parts of her dual heritage, she, like the other characters, makes her either/ or choice and claims only one part of her origin.

The last character to be mentioned is an example of a new, postmodern and thus no longer either/or approach to self-identification and ethnic identity. It is Vivian Twostar from Dorris's and Erdrich's postmodern novel *The Crown of Columbus*. Vivian's quest for identity in no longer the making of a choice between her inherited cultures, as it was the case with the previous characters; she is truly mixing and recombining her heritages. Vivian Twostar characterizes her heritage as "a mixed bag of New and Old Worlds" (Dorris and Erdrich 1991: 11). Vivian is the genuine personification of a melting pot. She explains:

> I belong to the lost tribe of mixed bloods, that hodgepodge amalgam of hue and cry that defies easy placement. When the DNA of my various ancestors – Irish and Coeur d'Alene and French and Navajo and God knows what else – combined to form me, the result was not some genteel, undecipherable puree that comes from a Cuisinart. You know what they say on the side of the Bisquick box, under instruction for pancakes? Mix with fork. Leave lumps. That was me.
>
> (Dorris and Erdrich 1991: 124)

As Farrell points out, "ethnic identity for Dorris and Erdrich is always complicated and shifting because many of their characters play many different roles in the fragmented, postmodern environment they move in" (1999: 124). To borrow David McCrone's phrase, they "wear their identities lightly" (1992: 195) in which way they may be seen as variations on the Native American trickster *topos*. It is not, however, an end in itself but rather a means to one's

survival. Contrary to Cogewea, who experienced her position of a mixed-blood as limiting, and to Pauline and Rayona, for whom the dual heritage was painful, for Vivian the complex heritage opens many new possibilities and allows for a broader perspective. In an interview, Erdrich states that unstable identities enable one "to pick and choose and keep and discard" cultural values at will and thus one can survive in a world that is so rapidly changing (Bruchac 1987: 79).

Dorris and Erdrich are playful about this part of identity quests in a multicultural, post-modern society – the kind of consumer attitude of choosing and purchasing whichever item suits you. On several occasions the Native American or mixed-blood characters eat or prepare ethnic food, as when for example Vivian's son Nash is eating "a bean burrito for dinner" (1991: 110). It reflects the fact that multiculturalism works best at the level of popular culture and life style. We wear ethnically marked clothes or accessories, eat ethnic food, and watch films about diverse cultures. While at the beginning of the twentieth century, as John Cawelti claims, popular culture still continued to foster white Anglo-American hegemony, in the last decades we can witness a strong "tendency toward mixing and overlapping of hitherto separate ethnic traditions" (Cawelti 1996: 14). Popular culture is "increasingly attuned to recombinations of traditional heritages" and the new media including the Internet, make "possible types of diversity and recombination that would have been unimaginable during the 1950s and 1960s" (Cawelti 1996: 15).

There are many instances of this mixing and recombination in the novel. For example, Vivian and her son Nash attend together a karate course and adopt some of the "Asian wisdom" involved in it. However, before each karate class session they add their own ritual – they recite a "portion of the Navajo Blessing Way" (Dorris and Erdrich 1991: 113) thus mixing together similarly functioning elements of their own Native American culture and Asian tradition. In the same way, when birthing, Vivian goes to a regular maternity hospital but takes with her a cloth bag that Grandma made for the occasion, filled with herbs Navajos traditionally associated with giving birth (1991: 92). In the culminating scenes of the novel when the lost treasure of Christopher Columbus is rediscovered, aspects of diverse cultures are consciously brought together and commented on by the novel's narrator:

> The world has become a small place, all parts connected, where an [American] Indian [hand wrapped in a clean white diaper] using an ancient Asian art can break into an old European box, witnessed by someone who grew up in Australia.
>
> (Dorris and Erdrich 1991: 369)

In the character of Vivian, the novel illustrates well the paradigmatic shift in the acceptance of ethnicity within American culture – the contemporary celebration and the fashionable *going ethnic*.

Perhaps the process of defining American identity has come full circle – because Vivian's heritage is so complex, she can no longer be labeled by a hyphenated descriptor. She can only be called American. It may confirm what de Crèvecoeur suggested and some earlier proponents of cultural pluralism believed – that being American is, in fact, being of mixed origin and thus there is no need for any hyphens to describe Americans' identity.

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